

What's in a Catholic Church? **

Part I: The Big Picture

The church is the proper place for the liturgical prayer of the parish community (cf. CCC 2691). In order to understand liturgical prayer, a closer examination of the church, vestments, and vessels used at Mass will help to understand what worship is. The Roman Ritual of the Mass explains how Mass is to be celebrated in order to facilitate communal prayer. *The symbolism of the Mass is rich and full of meaning and goes back to Jesus Christ himself.*

Gospels: Lk 22, 19; Mk 14, 22; Mt 26, 26; cf Jn 6, 26ff; Epistles of Paul: 1 Cor 11, 17-37; 1 Cor 10, 14ff



Church means 'a ssembly.' The word signifies in the first place the spiritual reality, the faithful united to Christ. Then the actual meeting, the assembly of the faithful. Finally the place of their meeting. The first churches are found in Rome. The catacombs, the underground cemeteries, were used for worship; there the Christians met for their assemblies. Mass was celebrated on a martyr's tomb, which became thus the altar table. The practice became general; so much so that when the basilicas were built the bodies of the martyrs were fetched to be put under the altar. Or else basilicas (ex. St. Peter' s and St. Paul' s) were built over a tomb. (H. Chery, "What is the Mass?" London: Blackfriars, 39-40).

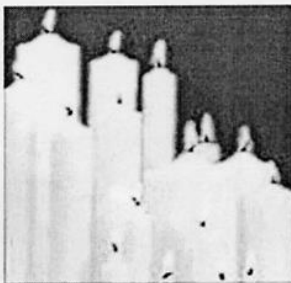
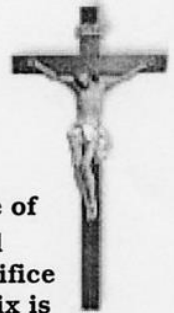


The holy water stoup is found at the entrances into the church. It contains holy water (blessed water) which each person uses to make the sign of the cross when entering or leaving the church. It symbolizes Baptism wherein the Christian is immersed in the waters of Jesus' death and emerges cleansed from sin.

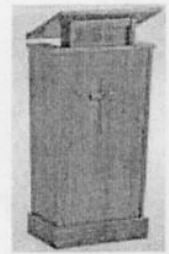
The **sanctuary** is traditionally understood to indicate the altar, the pulpit, and the chair area, usually set apart from the congregation structurally; it is symbolic of the spiritual world and of humanity' s spirituality, according to early Church fathers. It is considered a place of holiness and nearness to God. (From Rev. Peter Klein's *The Catholic Sourcebook*, 3rd ed., Orlando: BROWN-ROA, 2000. Imprimatur granted 1999.)

There are many types of **candles** in a Church: the Paschal candle which is lit on Easter and extinguished at Pentecost; the Sanctuary candle which is lit near the tabernacle to signal the presence of Christ under the form of the Blessed Sacrament; Altar candles to express devotion or a degree of festivity; and vigil candles (often associated with a donation) which are lit to represent the prayerful vigilance of expectant faith. (From Klein's *The Catholic Sourcebook*, 3rd ed. Full cite above.)

A **crucifix** is a cross bearing the figure of the crucified Christ (*corpus*). The sacrificial aspect of the Eucharist, "the unbloody sacrifice of Calvary," is emphasized where the crucifix is prominent about the altar. (From Klein's *The Catholic Sourcebook*, 3rd ed. Full cite above.)



The **ambo** is the place for proclaiming Scripture and preaching; used during the Liturgy of the Word.



**Note: Text material for the 4 pages of "What's in a Catholic Church" are taken mostly from: H. Chery, *What is the Mass?* London: Blackfriars, except where otherwise noted.

What's in a Catholic Church?

Part I: The Big Picture (continued)

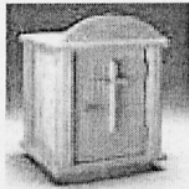
Altar: (*altare*, from the adjective *altus*, ("high") and *ara*)

With the Romans, *ara* was the small household altar; *altare* was the great monumental altar on which public sacrifices were offered. The first Christian altars were small household tables, especially set apart for the purpose and usually made of wood. Then altars were made of ordinary stone to resemble the tombs of the martyrs in the catacombs.

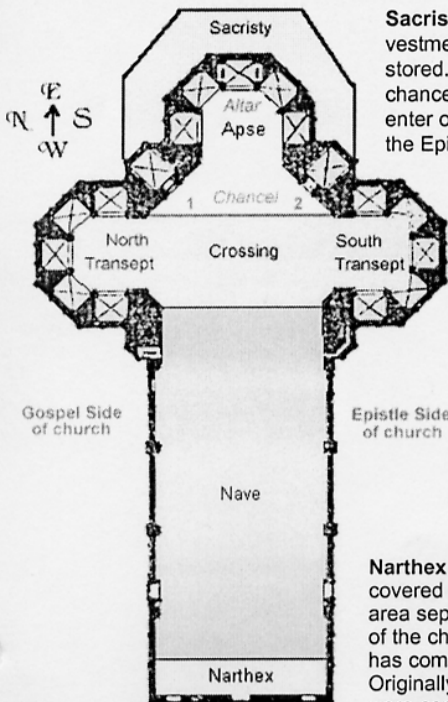
Dining table and tomb of a martyr: this twofold origin of the Christian altar has determined the form that we know today in most cases; a table resting on short columns or on a solid mass of masonry. The altar ought to contain relics of the bodies of the saints in remembrance of the custom of celebrating Mass on the tombs of the martyrs. Therefore, the altar is the place where the sacrifice of Jesus' life is offered for us by the priest (*in persona Christi*, "in the person of Christ" (Chery, 40). "The altar... represents the two aspects of the same mystery: the altar of sacrifice and the table of the Lord." CCC 1383. Christ is present there both as victim offered for our reconciliation with the Father and as food from heaven given to us.



Priests celebrating Mass at an altar (above).



The tabernacle- (*tabernaculum*, Latin for tent) is a gold or sometimes wooden box in which the Blessed Sacrament is kept. The name means tent because it symbolizes God's presence with the Israelite people wandering in the desert during the Exodus. Tabernacles in Catholic Churches hold within it the body and blood of Jesus Christ (to be given in communion or for adoration). A *sacnuary lamp* burns before the tabernacle as the sign that the Blessed Sacrament is present there.



Sacristy (or "Vestry")- where sacred vestments, liturgical vessels, etc., are stored. When the sacristy is behind the chancel and has two entrances, the priests enter on the Gospel side and exit through the Epistle side door.

Apse- architectural term denoting where the termination where the tabernacle is located.

Nave- refers to the "barque of Peter" and "Noah's Ark," the word "nave" is derived from the Latin word for ship, *navis*, and has come to mean the area where the parishioners sit or stand (pews are a very modern addition to the nave area).

Narthex (or "Vestibule")- an outside, covered porch-like structure or an inside area separated from the nave (the "body" of the church) by a screen, but this word has come to mean "entry" or "foyer." Originally, penitents and Catechumens were confined to this area until their reconciliation with or initiation into the Church.

Credit to Tracy Lopez's website for the above diagram.

A Sidebar on Gold in Churches:

(taken from K. Johnson's *Expressions of the Catholic Faith*, New York: Ballantine Books, 1994; Imprimatur granted.)

Most liturgical vessels are made of (or at least plated with) gold because of the metal's ancient symbolism of immortality, as gold never tarnishes nor corrodes, it is, for all practical purposes, immortal. Though in the Middle Ages some churches were criticized for storing up massive amounts of gold, prior to the French Revolution and the dawn of transportation networks, gold had mostly symbolic, not economic value. "Today, it still seems entirely natural that incorruptible gold should be used for the chalice that holds the Blood of the ever-living Christ, and for the patens and monstrances that hold his body." And "(i)n fairness, too, we should remember that those same churches and abbeys, not the secular governments, maintained full granaries that were opened in time of public need." (See pages 186-193.)

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Part II: Vestments

Prayer of Vesting Priests

When vesting for the liturgy, the cleric first washes his hands, praying:
"Give virtue to my hands, O Lord, that being cleansed from all stain I might serve you with purity of mind and body."

As he puts on the amice, the priest kisses the Cross on the Amice and prays:

"Place upon me, O Lord, the helmet of salvation, that I may overcome the assaults of the devil."

As he puts on his alb, he prays:

"Purify me, O Lord, and cleanse my heart; that, being made white in the Blood of the Lamb, I may come to eternal joy."

As he ties the cincture, he prays:

"Gird me, O Lord, with the girdle of purity, and extinguish in me all evil desires, that the virtue of chastity may abide in me."

As he puts on the maniple, he kisses the Cross on the maniple and prays:

"Grant, O Lord, that I may so bear the maniple of weeping and sorrow, that I may receive the reward for my labors with rejoicing."

As he puts on the stole, the priest kisses the Cross on the stole and prays:

"Restore unto me, O Lord, the stole of immortality, which was lost through the guilt of our first parents: and, although I am unworthy to approach Your sacred Mysteries, nevertheless grant unto me eternal joy."

As he puts on the chasuble, he prays:

"O Lord, Who said: My yoke is easy and My burden light: grant that I may bear it well and follow after You with thanksgiving. Amen."



amice

The amice- (*amicio* 'c over') It is the white cloth with which the priest wears around his neck (practically to preserve the other clothes from sweat).

Symbolically it is the helmet of salvation against the incursions of the devil.

The alb takes its name from its color, white (*alba*). It is an ample linen tunic. In origin it was an inner garment; symbolically it represents purity. The **cincture** is used to hold the alb together properly.



alb



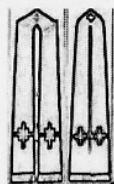
cincture

The cincture, a symbol of chastity, ties the alb at the waist.

The maniple, which symbolizes the acceptance of suffering, is a narrow strip of linen, of the same color as the chasuble, suspended from the left forearm so that it falls equally on both sides of the arm. It is to remind the cleric that he must patiently bear the cares and sorrows of this earthly life in the service of God and for Heavenly reward.



maniple



stole

The stole is a long piece of cloth about four inches wide draped around the neck and hangs down in front of the body. It symbolizes immortality. A deacon wears his stole pinned at the hip to distinguish himself from a priest.

The chasuble is the priest's vestment. Originally it was the ancient winter or traveling cloak which in Roman high society gradually took the place of the toga. It was an ample robe falling over the shoulders with an opening for the head (etymological origin: *casula*- 'a little house'). Today's chasuble has sought to leave the arms free for convenience. Symbolically the chasuble represents that "my yoke is sweet and my burden light."

chasuble



What's in a Catholic Church?

Part III: Vessels Pertaining to Mass and the Blessed Sacrament

"At the heart of the Eucharistic celebration are the bread and wine that, by the words of Christ and the invocation of the Holy Spirit, become Christ's Body and Blood" CCC 1333



The **chalice** is the cup which holds the wine that is to be consecrated. From very early times chalices were made of precious materials— crystal or silver, and very often enriched with precious stones. It distributes the precious blood when communion is given under both forms.

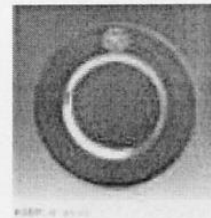


(Stacking ciboria)

The **ciborium** is the vessel in which the hosts are kept in the tabernacle. It is in the form of a cup on a stem with a lid and should be made of gold.



The **Communion paten** is a small plate, slightly concave, intended to hold the Host. Its use is very ancient, dating back to the 2nd century there is mention of the paten for the Eucharistic bread. At first it was made of glass, then of precious metal. The patens, in those days were of considerable size and weight, real plates fit to receive the offerings brought by the faithful. The breaking of the bread as well as distribution of communion takes place on the paten.



The **cruets** are to hold the water and wine for use during the consecration. The priest pours wine into the chalice then adds a little water. This is a reflection of the Greco-Roman tradition of cutting strong wine with water, and it also an apt symbolic representation of the blood and water which flowed from Christ's pierced side on the cross.



The **custodia**, like the ciborium, is also kept in the tabernacle and it holds the large host for exposition and benediction.

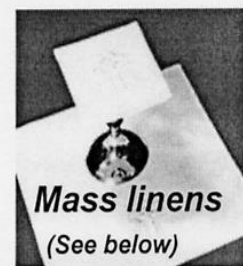
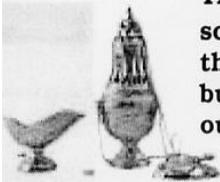
Ewer is a pitcher from which is poured water to wash the hands of the presiding priest before the Eucharistic prayer. The basin catches the water used for the washing.



The **monstrance** is tall vessel that holds a single consecrated host so that it can be seen and adored by the congregation during Benediction and Exposition. The circular glass case at the top is usually surrounded by rays of glory.



The **incense boat** and **thurible** are used during solemn celebrations of the Mass. The boat holds the incense that is put into the thurible or incensor which holds charcoal for burning the incense. The rising smoke of the incense symbolizes our prayers rising to heavens.



The altar cloth— The altar should be covered with a cloth of white material and symbolically remind us of the cloths with which the table of the Last Supper was covered. **The corporal**— (from *corpus* 'the body'— of Christ) This is the oldest of the altar linens. It is a special cloth on which the host and chalice are placed. Formerly it was large enough to cover the chalice; then, for reasons of convenience, the part that covered the chalice was cut off and became, the **pall**— A small square cloth, which is placed over the chalice. Etymologically *palla* means 'small cloth.' The corporal and pall must be made of linen in memory of the shroud which covered Jesus' body. **The chalice veil and burse**—The chalice veil is the extension of the corporal by covering the chalice. The burse holds the corporal.